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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to enhance understanding of individuals' and couples' emotional regulation processes, and the psychological mechanisms that connect work and family spheres for men and women. Forty-three couples and their eldest child participated in this study. On three consecutive days the parents completed several measures of work stress and marital behavior before leaving their workplace and before going to bed at night. Within several months they completed questionnaires assessing individual, marital, and family well-being. The teachers of the oldest child in each family provided ratings of the child's classroom behavior in the fall of the kindergarten year. Men who reported a significant level of stress at the end of the workday were more likely to report that they were behaving more negatively toward their partners than men who reported experiencing little or no stress. In stark contrast to the men, there was no link for women between the general level of stress they experienced during the day and their marital behavior or couple experience in the evenings. Children of parents exhibiting significant amounts of stress were seen by their teachers as more antisocial and less academically competent. (Contains 23 references.) (MDM)

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FAMILY INTERACTION UNDER STRESS: EMOTIONAL SPILLOVER FROM WORK STRESS TO FAMILY LIFE FOR PARENTS OF KINDERGARTNERS*

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This research was supported in part by a grant from the Spring Foundation. I would like to acknowledge the support and helpful guidance of Philip Cowan and Carolyn Cowan through all phases of this research project. I would also like to thank Rena Repetti for sharing with me her experience and expertise in the study of work-family spillover.

In both the popular press and research journals, increasing attention is being paid to the struggles and strains that both mothers and fathers experience as they juggle responsibilities in their work and family lives. Of particular concern is understanding if and how these strains place added burdens on individuals, on marital relationships and on parent-child relationships. In this paper, I will present some preliminary results from a new study which suggest that work stress spills over in different ways and to a different extent for men and women into their marital relationships in the evening. The new data also suggest that the quality of an individual's marriage amplifies or decreases this spillover effect depending on the gender of the individual. At the end of the paper, I will present some intriguing data showing how information about parents' daily work and family experiences is related to children's academic and social adaptation in kindergarten. I also speculate briefly on how the work and family measures examined in this study might influence children's development through their impact on the emotional climate of the family.

This study was designed to enhance our conceptual understanding of individuals' and couples' emotional regulation processes, and the psychological mechanisms that connect work and family spheres for men and women. There are a number of theoretically plausible ways in which work stress could affect individual and family life, but researchers have rarely designed their studies with a particular conceptual model in mind. This study is designed specifically to examine a spillover process model of work-family connections, which conceptualizes a person's emotional state as a medium through which experiences in one role area can influence experiences in another role area (Crouter, 1984; Piotrkowski, 1979). Emotional experiences from work can spill over into the home, directly and indirectly influencing the worker's behavior and experiences off the job.

Support for the importance of studying the emotional regulatory processes involved in spillover comes from recent research and theory in several distinct areas of research, including individual stress and coping (e.g., Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; Smith & Lazarus, 1991), couple interaction processes (e.g., Levenson & Gottman, 1985) and gender differences in depression (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987, 1990). Findings from these areas of research highlight the different ways in which men and women internally and interpersonally regulate negative emotional arousal and the centrality of these regulatory processes for psychological and physical well-being.

In most studies of work-family connections, work stress and family functioning were assessed at one point in time. The fact that the variables found to be correlated are measured at one point in time makes it impossible to ascertain the direction of influence between the variables, and also limits our understanding of <u>how</u> one variable might influence the other. Building on a daily diary approach used recently by several researchers (e.g., Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989; Crouter, Perry-Jenkins, Huston & Crawford, 1989), but in particular Rena Repetti (1989, 1991) in her work with

male air traffic controllers and female white collar workers, the current study seeks to improve our understanding of spillover processes and the role they may play in linking work experiences to family life.

Since spillover is typically conceptualized as a short-term dynamic process that occurs during each day -- from the end of the work day to family life in the evening -- it is difficult to capture adequately with single assessment, correlational designs. To examine spillover phenomena in a more differentiated way, several important methodological steps have been taken in this study. (1) The phenomena of spillover was studied at the appropriate level and time period -- from the end of the work day to family time in the evening. (2) The assessments of work and family variables were separated in time so that prospective connections can be investigated to better understand the direction of influence. (3) Repeated measurements of work and family were made so that within-subject effects could be fully explored. In addition to comparing the family lives of the most highly stressed individuals to that of the least stressed individuals (a between-subjects question), the study examines an individual's day to day variability in work stress to see if this is predictive of variations in his or her behavior within the family in the evening (a within-subject question). (4) The work to family spillover patterns of men and women from the same families (i.e., husbands and wives) were examined simultaneously to allow for full exploration of gender differences. (5) In this study, work was conceptualized as both paid employment outside the home as well as unpaid work within the house that occurs during the day.

METHOD

Participants

Forty-three couples from the larger Schoolchildren and their Families (SAF) project participated in this study when their oldest child was of Kindergarten age. These couples represented 86% of the families participating in the first wave of data collection in the SAF project. Eight couples from this initial wave either declined to participate in this part of the project or were unable to complete the assessments required for this study. The participants were predominantly middle class and were ethnically and racially diverse, with 20% being of African-American, Hispanic or Asian heritage. They report annual family incomes ranging from $26,000 to $224,000 (median=72,500). All but one of the men in the sample were employed at least 32 hours per week. The median annual income for men was $50,000. Seventy -three percent of the women in the sample were employed at least 12 hours per week. The women who did work more than 12 hours weekly were employed on average 35 hours per week (S.D. 13) and their mean annual income was $40,900 (S.D. 31,500). The men and women in the study were employed in a wide range of jobs.

Project Design

On three consecutive days, participants completed separate daily reports (a) at the end of the work day (before leaving work for those who were employed outside the home) and (b) before going to bed at night. The reports at the end of each day

included assessments of each participant's perceptions of the stressfulness of their work days (adapted from Repetti, 1991) and the degree of negative emotional arousal they were experiencing as they finished work (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). On each of the evenings of those same three days, right before going to sleep, the participants filled out a questionnaire which included reports on their own and their partner's marital behaviors (adapted from Repetti, 1989a; Weiss & Perry, 1985) and on their perception of the affective tone of their couple interactions that evening (Repetti, 1989b). Data on the quality of each parent's interactions with his or her oldest child were also collected on each of the three nights and will be utilized in future analyses.

Within several months of the daily assessments, participants filled out questionnaires assessing their individual and marital well-being and specific characteristics of their work and family lives. These data are being used to investigate individual and marital factors that may buffer or exacerbate the impact of work stress on the family. In my presentation today, I will focus on the role marital satisfaction plays in moderating the spillover of work stress into family life. I will also be taking a brief and preliminary look at how the reports of daily work stress and marital behavior relate to children's adjustment to Kindergarten. The teachers of the oldest child in each family provided ratings of the child's classroom behavior in the fall of the kindergarten year.

Measures of Work Stress

In the questionnaires that were filled out at the end of each of the three work days, participants completed two measures that serve as separate indices of work stress. The first measure focused on perceptions of the work day and the second focused on the affective state of the individual at the end of the work day.

The Disconcerting Work Day Scale (husbands' mean alpha=.79, wives' mean alpha=.81; adapted from Repetti's *Preferred Conditions Scale*, 1991 with one additional item added) consists of 4 items that focus on perceptions of the day as being manageable, under one's control, and close to ideal. Items were rated on a 4-point scale and averaged to obtain a total score. All items were reverse scored so that high scores on this scale indicate a more disconcerting work day.

Negative Affectivity: The negative affectivity scale of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS -- Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) consists of 10 mood adjectives which are associated with subjective distress (e.g., upset, guilty, irritable, distressed, nervous, and jittery) Respondents were asked to characterize on a 5-point scale the extent to which they experienced each negative feeling or emotion that work day (husbands' mean self report alpha=.88; wives' mean self report alpha=.71). Items were averaged to obtain a total scale score.

For men and women, the two measures of work stress were moderately correlated (men, r=.51; women, r=.49).

Measures of Marital Behaviors and Couple Interaction in the Evening

Individual and dyadic aspects of the couple relationship each evening were assessed by questionnaires. Both husbands and wives reported on their own behavior and their partner's behavior during the time they were at home with their partner and had an opportunity to interact as a couple. This data collection, therefore, yielded both self-reports and partner-reports of each individual's marital behavior. On a dyadic level, each participant reported on his or her perceptions of the affective quality of their couple relationship each evening.

Negative Marital Behavior Scale (husbands' mean self report alpha=.91; husbands' partner report alpha=.88; wives' mean self report alpha=.83; wives' partner report alpha=.88; adapted from Repetti, 1989a and Weiss & Perry, 1983 with additional items added) consists of 13 items that describe active expressions of angry or critical behavior (e.g., I was argumentative; I yelled at my partner; I was critical of my partner). Items were rated on a 4-point scale (0=not at all descriptive, 3=completely descriptive) and averaged to derive a total score.

Marital Withdrawal Scale (husbands' mean self report alpha=.84; husbands' partner report alpha=.76; wives' mean self report alpha=.74; wives' partner report alpha=.76; adapted from Repetti, 1989a and Weiss & Perry, 1983 with additional items added) consists of 9 items that describe disengagement or detachment from the marital relationship (e.g., I was in my own world; I wanted to be alone; I was withdrawn). Items were rated on a 4-point scale and averaged to derive a total score.

Dysphoric Couple Interaction (husbands' mean alpha=.76, wives' mean alpha=.71; adapted from Repetti, 1989b) consists of 10 adjectives describing negative affective qualities of a couple relationship. Participants were asked to indicate by a 4-point scale how well each item described the time they and their partner spent together that evening. The wording for each item is: "between my partner and me there was a feeling of _____." Examples of the items are hostility, anger, unhappiness and tension. Items were averaged to derive a total score.

Scale means, standard deviations and alphas are summarized in Table 1. Correlations among the family behavior and couple interaction scales are listed in Table 2.

Global Measures of Marital Functioning and Children's Adjustment

Marital Satisfaction: The Locke-Wallace Short Marital Adjustment Test (Locke and Wallace, 1959) is a widely used 15-item questionnaire that each participant completed prior to the 3-day work-family assessments. The questionnaire asks about couple disagreements in a variety of areas and individuals' overall satisfaction with their marriage.

Children's Adjustment to Kindergarten: An adaptation of the Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory (CABI: Schaefer & Hunter, 1983) was completed by

each child's teacher in the fall of the child's kindergarten year. Additional items were added to the CABI from the downward extension of the Quay-Peterson Behavior Problem Checklist (O'Donnell & VanTuinen, 1979) and Achenbach and Edelbrock's Child Behavior Checklist (1978). New items focusing on peer relations were created for this study. The teachers used this modified CABI to describe each child in their class without knowing which child was in the study. Scores on each scale in the instrument were converted to z-scores representing the behavior of the child in the study in comparison to the other children in his or her class. The following factor-based composite scales were used in this study: (1) Antisocial -- capturing externalizing and hostile behaviors; (2) Internalizing -- describing introverted, tense and withdrawn qualities; and (3) Academic Competence -- capturing intelligence, creativity and the ability to stay focused on classroom tasks. Scores on this instrument were available for only 34 of the families in the present study.

Data Analytic Approach

Because of the preliminary nature of these analyses, a significance level of $p<.1$ was set. Two basic types of analyses were carried out.

1. The 3-day average of each daily work and marital scale was used in correlational analyses to examine between-subjects effects on these variables. That is, how do the marital interactions of individuals who are generally high in work stress compare to those who are generally low in work stress?

2. A within-subject multiple regression analysis modeled after Repetti (1989) was employed to look at day-to-day spillover of work stress into family life. Separate regression analyses were conducted to assess the bivariate relationship between each daily work stress variable and day-to-day changes in each of the marital variables. For these analyses, the first task is to partial out all the variance in the daily marital outcome variables due to an individual's baseline level on each of these variables. All of this between-subjects variance in the marital variables was controlled for in the regression model with the use of criterion scale coding, which requires the creation of a vector score for each subject consisting of that subjects 3-day average on a particular outcome variable. Once this variance is partialed out, the marital variable being predicted by each day's work stress will essentially be that day's deviation from the participant's 3-day average. This technique is equivalent to the use of dummy variables for each subject to control for between-subject variance except for the loss of one degree of freedom.

Further regression analysis was conducted to examine the role marital satisfaction plays in buffering or amplifying the spillover of daily work stress into family life. Two product terms were created between individuals' scores on the Short Marital Adjustment Test and each of the two daily measures of work stress. In addition to controlling for an individual's baseline level on the marital outcome

of interest, individuals' Marital Adjustment scores were also controlled for before the interaction term was entered in the regression.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the correlational and multiple regression analyses are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Correlational (Between-Subjects) Analyses

Are there differences in marital behaviors and couple interactions depending on the level of stress individuals generally experience during the work day? Compared to men who generally experienced little stress at work, men who generally experienced disconcerting work days or left work feeling more affectively distressed (as measured by the negative affectivity scale) were more likely to report that they were behaving more negatively toward their partners, they were withdrawing from their partners in the evenings and feeling that their relationships with their partners were generally more negative. The wives' independent reports of their husbands' marital behavior and their nightly assessment of the couple relationship generally confirmed each of these findings (except that the link between disconcerting work days and negative engagement and the link between disconcerting work days and dysphoric couple interactions were not statistically significant). The relationship between affective distress during the work day and dysphoric couple interactions in the evening was particularly strong (r=.56 for husbands' couple report and r=.57 for wives' couple report). Men's reports of their general level of affective distress at work explain over 30% of the variance in each partner's perception of the general affective quality of their couple relationship during the evening. It is important to recognize that the wives' reports of the couple interaction are collected independently of the husbands' reports of their work days and therefore offer compelling evidence that the link between distress at work and marital difficulties is not merely an artifact of self-report response bias.

In stark contrast to the men, there was no link for women between the general level of stress they experienced during the day, as measured by the disconcerting work day scale and the negative affectivity scale, and their marital behavior or couple experience in the evenings. (These results remained the same when the correlational analyses were run on only the working women in the sample.)

The results for the men in the sample are consistent with previous correlational studies which show links between generally distressing work days and more negative couple and family interactions (e.g., Jackson & Maslach, 1982). I want to highlight three qualities about the findings from the present study: (1) The

connections between work stress and family life differ markedly for men and women. (2) The correlational links found between work and family life may be due to a variety of both short- and long-term mechanisms, including, but certainly not limited to spillover processes. In these correlational analyses, it is also difficult to tease out the direction of influence between work and family distress. (3) Most studies of work stress and family functioning are limited to these type of correlational findings. The analyses that are presented below take advantage of the repeated measures collected in this study to improve our understanding of the nature of the connections between daily work stress and marital interaction in this sample.

Regression (Within-subject Analyses)

What happens to an individual's marital relationship when he or she experiences a more stressful day than is usual? The findings suggest a complex connection between daily work stress and evening marital interaction -- a connection that depends significantly on the kind of work stress (perceptions of the work day versus negative affective arousal), the gender of the individual and the individual's level of marital satisfaction.

A. DISCONCERTING WORK DAYS:

When men experience a work day that is more disconcerting than usual, their wives report that the couple relationship that evening is more negative. For women, the influence on evening marital interactions of experiencing a more disconcerting day than usual is fully dependent on their general satisfaction with their marriage. Compared to women in distressed marriages, women who feel satisfied about their marriage tend to engage in more negative behaviors (according to their husbands' reports) when their work days are tougher. The more satisfied wives also tend to feel that their couple interactions are more negative after they experience a disconcerting day.

B. NEGATIVE EMOTIONAL AROUSAL DURING THE WORK DAY

When men experience higher levels of negative emotional arousal at work than normal they report that they are more withdrawn than is usual and that their couple interactions feel more negative that evening. The wives' reports of the couple relationship on men's distressing work days confirm these findings. Men who feel less satisfied about their marriages are even more likely to have negative affect from the work day spill over into their marriages later that evening. Both husbands and wives in more distressed marriages report more negative couple interactions and the husbands engaging in more negative marital behaviors on evenings after the husbands have left work more affectively distressed than usual.

When women experience higher levels of negative emotional arousal during the work day there is no increase in their negative marital behaviors and the couple relationship is not experienced as more negative by either partner, but there is a tendency for women to withdraw from the marital relationship (although this finding does not reach statistical significance -- $p=.15$). In further contrast to the

men, the quality of the marital relationship has no bearing for women on the spillover of negative affectivity into the family in the evening.

In previous studies, the most typical response to increases in daily work stress has been found to be withdrawal from family relations (e.g., Repetti, 1989a, 1991). In the present study, in addition to a tendency to withdraw, men in less satisfying marital relationships also appear to respond to increased work stress with angry, critical behaviors toward their partners. The present study demonstrates the importance of examining moderators of the work-family spillover relationship, such as overall marital satisfaction and examining gender patterns in a sample in which the men and women are married to each other. In this sample, it appears that women who are pleased with their marriages have a more fluid boundary between negative experiences at work and negative experiences in their marriage. For maritally satisfied men, this boundary is more rigid. This may attest to differences in what men and women look for in intimate relationships.

Another important pattern among the findings in the present study is that men demonstrate a stronger tendency to experience spillover than women. These findings challenge existing thinking about men being able to compartmentalize their lives more than women (cf. Weiss, 1990). At this point, I offer only preliminary speculation about why there are such gender differences: (1) Women's roles at home may be more rigidly ascribed so that there is less freedom to vary their day to day family responses to work stress. (2) The spillover differences may have to do with gender differences in regulating negative affective arousal. (3) It may be that for mothers the domain of family life most sensitive to changes in work stress is parent-child interactions. This is an area that I will examine further in future analyses.

Links Between Work and Family Variables and Child Outcomes

Do the daily measures of work stress and marital interaction used in this study relate to children's adaptation? There is ample evidence from previous studies that the quality of the marital relationship has important implications for the quality of parent-child relationships and for the child's developmental progress (e.g., Cowan, Cowan, Schulz & Heming, 1993; Gottman and Fainsilber, 1989). Although I cannot at this time elaborate all the connections, when parents in this study experienced more work stress or they had the kinds of marital difficulties assessed by the daily measures in this study, their children were having a more difficult time at school.

The children were not doing as well in families in which mothers reported being more affectively distressed at the end of the work day. The kids in these families were seen by their teachers as more antisocial (r=.30), less academically competent (r=-.25) and having more internalizing symptoms (r=.25). Mothers' reports of their nightly negative marital behaviors (r=.26) and perceptions of their couple interactions as negative (r=.45) were linked with their kids having more

antisocial difficulties. Mothers' tendency to withdraw from their partners at night was associated with internalizing symptoms in their children. Fathers' angry, hostile marital behavior as reported by mothers is linked with more antisocial behavior (r=.51) and less academic competence (r=-.28). Interestingly, when fathers reported that they tended to withdraw from the marriage in the evening after work, their children were seen by their teachers as more academically competent (r=.24).

The links between marital experiences and children's development, as have been shown elsewhere (e.g., Cowan, Cowan & Schulz, 1993; Cowan, Cowan, Schulz & Heming, in press) are probably both direct and indirect. Conflict and tension in the marital relationship at a chronic level may disequillibrate children both cognitively and emotionally. Difficulties in the marital relationship can also have consequences for the way parents treat their children, for the way parents manage their children's peer relationships, and for the way that parents relate to their child's new school experience.

Summary and Implications

The results from this study suggest that the marital relations of parents of young children are responsive to the quality of their work days. There are intriguing gender differences in these connections with men showing a clearer pattern of spillover from work to family life. Overall marital satisfaction is an important moderator of work to family spillover and it seems to work in quite distinct ways for men and women. A full understanding of the ways in which stressful work experiences influence family lives requires consideration of nightly parent-child relationships and the examination of other key variables which may buffer or exacerbate the impact of work stress on parents. Individual factors such as the personal meaning of work and family life for each person (e.g., preferred work-family balance, reasons for working), family factors such as a couple's division of family labor, and social factors such as family income and the type of job the individual holds (including, but not limited to, whether a woman is working exclusively in the home or also outside the home) will be investigated in future analyses as moderators of the impact of work stress on men's and women's family life and well-being.

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Table 1

Predictor and Criterion Scale Scores: Means, Standard Deviations, and Alphas

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Alpha
MEN			
Disconcerting Work Day	2.43	.42	.79
Negative Affectivity	1.30	.29	.88
Negative Marital Behavior			
Self Report	.18	.22	.91
Wife's Report	.13	.16	.88
Marital Withdrawal			
Self Report	.68	.35	.84
Wife's Report	.59	.32	.76
WOMEN			
Disconcerting Work Day	2.25	.40	.81
Negative Affectivity	1.26	.21	.71
Negative Marital Behavior			
Self Report	.16	.17	.83
Husband's Report	.18	.20	.88
Marital Withdrawal			
Self Report	.57	.29	.74
Husband's Report	.59	.30	.76
COUPLE			
Couple Dysphoria			
Husband's Report	.19	.17	.76
Wife's Report	.15	.17	.71

N = 43

Table 2

Intercorrelations Among Self and Partner Report Marital Behavior and Couple Interaction Variables

MEN	Neg Marital Behavior		Marital Withdrawal		Couple Dysphoria	
	Self	Partner	Self	Partner	Husband	Wife
Neg. Marital Behavior						
Self Report	--	**.49****	.33*	.14	.46**	.21#
Partner Report		--	.05	.24#	.40**	.64**
Marital Withdrawal						
Self Report			--	**.52****	.47**	.25#
Partner Report				--	.21#	.48**
Couple Dysphoria						
Husband's Report					--	**.50****
Wife's Report						--

WOMEN	Neg Marital Behavior		Marital Withdrawal		Couple Dysphoria	
	Self	Partner	Self	Partner	Husband	Wife
Neg. Marital Behavior						
Self Report	--	**.38****	.37**	.21#	.44**	.53**
Partner Report		--	-.03	.35*	.46**	.03
Marital Withdrawal						
Self Report			--	**.32***	.05	.44*
Partner Report				--	.38**	.21#

Highlighted correlations are comparisons between self and partner report.

# $p < .1$

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

N = 43

Table 3

Correlational Analyses Linking General Work Experience With General Marital Behavior and Couple Interaction at Home (Between-Subjects Effects)

	r	
MEN	Disconcerting Day	Negative Affectivity
Husband's Negative Marital Behaviors		
Self Report	.24#	.28*
Wife's Report	.17	.27*
Husband's Marital Withdrawal		
Self Report	.37**	.43**
Wife's Report	.30*	.26#
Dysphoric Couple Interaction		
Husband's Report	.37**	.56**
Wife's Report	.19	.57**
WOMEN	Disconcerting Day	Negative Affectivity
Wife's Negative Marital Behaviors		
Self Report	-.16	.18
Husband's Report	-.10	.09
Wife's Marital Withdrawal		
Self Report	.16	.11
Husband's Report	.02	-.04
Dysphoric Couple Interaction		
Wife's Report	-.11	-.02
Husband's Report	.01	.10

# p< .10
* p< .05
**p< .01

N = 42 observations

Table 4

Multiple Regression Analyses: *Daily* Work Experience Predicting Evening Marital Behavior and Couple Interaction at Home (Within-Subject Effects)

	Significant Betas [a]			
MEN	Disconcerting Day	Discon. X Mar. Sat.	Negative Affectivity	Neg Aff. X Mar. Sat.
Negative Marital Behaviors				
Self Report				-1.40**
Wife's Report				-.881#
Marital Withdrawal				
Self Report			+.176**	
Wife's Report				
Dysphoric Couple Interaction				
Husband's Report			+.129#	-.871#
Wife's Report	+.098 (p=.10)		+.200**	-.838*
WOMEN	Disconcerting Day	Discon. X Mar. Sat.	Negative Affectivity	Neg Aff. X Mar. Sat.
Negative Marital Behaviors				
Self Report				
Husband's Report		+.940*		
Marital Withdrawal				
Self Report			+.092 (p=.15)	
Husband's Report				
Dysphoric Couple Interaction				
Wife's Report		+1.228*		
Husband's Report				

[a] Standardized Beta

#p < .10

*p < .05

**p < .01